

## Sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist

## Christ the King

Readings: Jeremiah 23.1-6, Colossians 1.11-20, Luke 23.33-43

23 November 2025

If ever there was a monarch who fulfils our stereotypical images of kingship, it has to be Louis XIV of France. He reigned for over 72 years, and is certainly one of the most remembered kings, if only for his extreme lavishness, the Palace of Versailles being the prime example. Louis was known as the Sun King because he associated himself with the Roman sun god, Apollo, believing that as the world revolved around the sun, so France revolved around him. And although he did many good things for the country, I think it's fair to say that his main focus was on self-glorification.

In the late 1680's, when Louis had already been on the throne for over 40 years, he appointed a very gifted priest to serve as tutor to his grandson, second in line to the throne. The young prince wasn't the brightest of students, but the tutor persevered and did a really good job, perhaps too good a job as we'll shortly discover.

One of the tools he used was a book he'd written, based on a character from Greek mythology, telling of the adventures of Telemachus. In the story, the hero is given a guide, 'Mentor', who takes his student on a journey all around the ancient world so that he can see different types of governance and identify the best form of it. And by the end of the story, Telemachus comes to realise that it's not the job of the people to serve the king; rather, a really good king served his people, shepherded them, giving something of himself to them.

Now we may think there's nothing dramatic about that idea but, of course, in the court of Louis XIV, it created great shock waves. Once the king learnt about the teaching happening in his own royal household, the tutor was duly sent into exile.

Such teaching, though, points us towards the sort of king we encounter in today's readings. In our Old Testament passage from Jeremiah, we find the prophet, firstly criticising the rulers of Israel for neglecting & misusing their shepherding role, and then going on to claim that God will raise up good shepherds in their place. For within the ancient Near East, the figure of the shepherd to indicate kingship was well established; in fact, in Egypt, some pharaohs actually included the shepherd's crook among the symbols that denoted their royal status. So Jeremiah is keen to emphasise this shepherding role, but he goes further still, directing the people towards a longer-term future in which a king will be provided from the line of David. That monarch, of course, is the focus of our celebration today as we mark the feast of the good shepherd, Christ the King.

It is a relatively new celebration within the Christian calendar, only inaugurated in 1925 by the then Pope, Pius XI. Pius was troubled by the rise of fascism and secularism in Europe, and hoped that by introducing this new feast day, Christians would be reminded that their true allegiance lay with Christ rather than with any earthly leader.

It is, then, a day that has quite an edge to it, given the current state of international politics and the posturing of its leaders, and even more so in the light of today's Gospel. For of all the images that kingship brings to mind, this certainly isn't one of them - a scene of dereliction in which a man is hanging on a cross alongside two criminals. What sort of king is this? Let's have a closer look.

In the passage from Luke, we find this king being mocked by a variety of scoffers; 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God!' claim the religious leaders, whilst the soldiers shout 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.' And then there is the unrepentant criminal: 'Are you not the Messiah; save yourself and us'.

The repeated call is for this king to save himself.

This king, though, rejects such calls. For him, they represent temptation, not dissimilar to those he experienced in the wilderness. For just as the devil had earlier challenged his vocational identity by offering him seemingly more attractive options, so now he is being invited to come down from the cross. The temptation is to reveal a perhaps more expected mark of kingship, a power play involving self-protection and retaliation. But this king stays where he is, firmly committed to his own distinctive calling, daring to trust that God will lead him through the cross and beyond, reconciling to himself all things.

Ironically, of course, the scoffers' demands pose the paradox of his kingly mission, for here we have a king who saves others, ONLY by not saving himself, for it is in the apparent powerlessness of the cross that he demonstrates the authority that ultimately rescues even the very people who mock him.

There is one person in the scene, though, who perceives this truth and dares to speak it. It is the second criminal who sees that Jesus will only enter his kingly realm by remaining on the cross. Unlike the other actors in the drama who simply suppose that Jesus' fortunes are coming to an end, this criminal perceives that Christ's kingship is only just beginning. And so his request 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' isn't simply a plea, not to be forgotten. It is a confession of faith & a sign that he's glimpsed something of the mystery of the Gospel – that there in a life broken in love for his world, forgiveness and acceptance is made real. And his plea is met with words of hope, with words of life. 'Today shalt thou be with me in paradise'. For Luke, these are Jesus' final words from the cross to humanity. Words which sum up the heart of the king he proclaims.

To have ended up here means that we've come on quite a journey into understanding kingship from where we started in the Court of Louis XIV. Significantly the tutor Louis sent into exile was a man called Francois Fenelon, a figure not that well known today, but at the time, he was one of the most prominent intellectual figures in Europe; and his book 'The Adventures of Telemachus' became the best seller of the 18th century, being translated into over 14 languages.

Both Fenelon and our Gospel writer before him knew what true kingship entailed and that the king we celebrate today is no ordinary king; for in Christ we have a king who shepherds his people to the point of laying down his life for them, so that they many know themselves to be loved and forgiven, and set free to serve.

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